BOOK REVIEW

Calling the Shots: How Individualism Is Damaging Mass Vaccination Strategies

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Calling the Shots: Why Parents Reject Vaccines.
By Reich, J. A.
New York: New York University Press, 2016, 315 pp, £20.99 (hardcover).

"*If you don't want to vaccinate your children, fine, but don't take them to Disneyland*." This quote is from a mother of a child with leukemia, worried about the possible impact of the 2015 California measles outbreak on the fragile health of her daughter. And so begins Jennifer Reich's intriguing foray into the controversial world of immunization debates.

Calling the shots is based on 7 years of fieldwork in the United States, including interviews with parents who reject vaccination, physicians who must deal with this topic, and even lawyers who deal with vaccine damage compensation schemes. It very explicitly does not deal with those who don't vaccinate due to lack of access or missed healthcare appointments. Rather this book is about the very active, time consuming process that some, often well-educated parents go through in questioning mass vaccination strategies.

After a lively introduction, Chapter 1 places vaccination debates in historical context, and Chapter 2 moves on to discuss the rise of parents as experts. Citing Lupton's work (2009), the author describes how parents navigate risk discourse, and portray themselves as ultimately responsible for their child's health. Chapter 3 concentrates on the construction of vaccines as unnatural, in dramatic contrast to the pure, innocent body of the new-born baby. The next chapter deals with critiques of big pharma, given that production is heavily concentrated in a few international firms. Echoing the book itself, Chapter 5 is entitled "Who calls the shots," and discusses the complex process of trying to find a physician sympathetic to vaccine concerns. The chapter nicely reveals the struggle for professionals; on one hand increasingly taught that health care should be individualized, on the other hand expected to advocate a "one size fits all" vaccination approach.

The book then returns to its core focus on parents, and discusses the "slow-vax movement." Like the slow food movement, this concept is about rejecting speed and

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efficiency, under the belief that slow equates to caution and is somehow superior. Applied to vaccination, some parents are rejecting the standard recommended vaccination schedule, in favor of a more personalized approach, where some vaccines may be accepted, and others rejected or delayed. Reich summarizes this as a "fundamental transformation of preventative care from a more uniform public health system into menus of individual choices" (192). Chapter 7 then concentrates the alternative health practices of parents, before Chapter 8 deals with the thorny issue of liberty, and how critical parents get around a system where proof of vaccination is necessary for school and nursery entry.

Calling the shots has some clear strengths. It is very well written, with a strong narrative voice, and an easy to read style that should enable it to travel beyond the academy. It is also very detailed with an impressive range of sources, detail that would have been lost had the author been tempted to try and cover all aspects of vaccination, such as campaign groups or media coverage. The book also resolutely refuses to fall into the pro or anti camp, although the author is candid in revealing her own personal vaccination decisions. Overall, the argument is persuasive, and nicely reveals the interconnections of several cultural ideologies — such as personalized medicine and individualized parenting — that, taken together, have the power to undermine the collectivized rationale of mass vaccination. The most intriguing irony is that in refusing a state sanctioned public health measure, some parents are actually conforming to other public health and cultural messages (and see Hobson-West 2007; Yaqub et al., 2014).

I have two minor criticisms of the book. The first is that it is not sufficiently reflexive of its own geography. The author claims to focus on vaccination in historical, cultural, and social context, and does this well. However, what is surprising is that the U.S. location of the research is not even acknowledged. For international readers, this means that some things (such as reference to campaigns led by celebrities) get a little lost in translation. More importantly, it also means that the contemporary role of the state in requiring vaccination reads as slightly taken for granted. In the discussion of "liberty," it would have been useful to briefly compare the United States with other vaccination systems without this level of coercion.

Second, I found the book's conclusion tantalizing, but somewhat disappointing in terms of implications for health policy. Whilst the author should be praised for her carefully balanced discussion of parent's arguments, in the end Reich does critically conclude that vaccination resistance "represents an individual sense of entitlement to use public resources without shared responsibility to others" (237). Middle class parents, she explains all too briefly, may no longer feel that the "herd" is supporting them, as the economy worsens and many demand more private investment in public institutions. If this fascinating observation is correct, then surely this has implications for debates in the United States and beyond, about the future role of the state and public funding? In short, despite Reich's excellent book, there is still plenty of room for more academic attention to be paid to the political economy of mass vaccination strategies.

REFERENCES

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Pru Hobson-West is a medical sociologist and Assistant Professor in Welfare, Ethics and Society in the School of Veterinary Medicine and Science at the University of Nottingham, UK. She is the author of publications on the role of risk and trust in UK vaccination debates, and is also known for her research on animal use in science, and for work in the emerging field of veterinary sociology.